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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000599

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SUBJECT: REACTION TO PRESIDENT ALIYEV'S MAY 4 COMMENTS ON  
NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) President Aliyev struck a tough tone in his May 4 speech on the GOAJ's position on a Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) settlement at the opening of an IDP center. Aliyev appeared to distance himself publicly from the idea of "special modalities" for Kelbajar and Lachin, focusing on the need for all seven occupied territories to be returned to Azerbaijan. Given the audience, Aliyev's speech unsurprisingly focused on the principle of "territorial integrity," not the corresponding OSCE Minsk principle of "self-determination." Aliyev reiterated previously-stated aspects of the GOAJ's approach toward settling the conflict: NK's status can only be decided after Azerbaijanis are given the right of return, and NK's status cannot violate Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Emphasizing Azerbaijan's growing economic power, Aliyev also issued veiled threats of Azerbaijan's military might, a common trend in domestic speeches where he periodically reaffirms Azerbaijan's commitment to the Minsk Group process as well as its readiness to retake Karabakh by military means if needed. The general public has shown little reaction to the speech, while political commentators have highlighted that Aliyev's legitimacy is intimately connected to his position on NK and that he had to take a strong stand on the anniversary of the fall of Shusha, which is regarded by most Azerbaijanis as the cultural heartland of NK. End Summary

Aliyev Adopts Tough Tone  
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¶2. (SBU) On May 4, President Ilham Aliyev gave a public speech to an IDP community audience outlining the GOAJ's position regarding a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict. Aliyev struck a confident, strong tone, suggesting that he wanted to set the record straight on the GOAJ's approach to the conflict. Aliyev called on Azerbaijanis to listen to his position as "the Minsk Group representatives and Armenian representatives are putting forward various theories." (Note: This and all other subsequent quotations from Aliyev's speech are by the Open Source Center's translation of a May 4 ANS broadcast. See CEP20070504950237. Aliyev gave the speech in conjunction with the opening of an IDP settlement in the Sabunchu district of Baku. Full text emailed to State EUR/CARC.)

¶3. (SBU) One of Aliyev's key points was that all seven occupied territories surrounding NK need to be vacated by Armenian forces. Specifically, Aliyev sought to distance himself publicly from the concept of "special modalities" for

Kelbajar and Lachin. Aliyev stated, "...at previous stages, proposals were made that five districts be vacated while Kelbajar and Lachin districts be left and be the subject of future talks. We never agreed to this because we cannot allow the return of Kelbajar and Lachin to be carried out under some conditions. Never." Despite Aliyev's more strident tone on this point, Aliyev subsequently stated that there is "general agreement" that the seven districts will be returned to Azerbaijan in a "phased way," although the phase should not be "protracted for long." Aliyev also subsequently acknowledged that international peacekeepers could use the Lachin corridor to maintain contact between NK and Armenia.

¶4. (SBU) Aliyev's speech also reiterated familiar GOAJ themes concerning NK. First, NK's status can only be decided after displaced residents of NK are granted the right of return. Second, Aliyev acknowledged that NK "can be given a status," but any "status" would be within the context of maintaining Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. (Comment: This formulation -- of NK being eligible for some type of "status" consistent with the broader principle of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity -- is the GOAJ's standard formulation while addressing a domestic audience on the topic of NK's status. For example, Mammadyarov on April 26 that "if we speak about the NK's status first of all, it gets the highest autonomy within Azerbaijan." Mammadyarov also noted that after the Azerbaijani community is allowed to return to NK and Armenians and Azerbaijanis "live together normally, we will define NK's status within Azerbaijan.") Finally, noting Azerbaijan's growing economic power, Aliyev issued the usual veiled threat of Azerbaijan's rising military power, Armenia's growing isolation, and Azerbaijan's limited patience in negotiations. (Comment: None of these three

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themes is new, as Aliyev has made these points on several other occasions, alongside periodically reaffirming Azerbaijan's commitment to the Minsk Group process. The themes were, however, tied together in a public speech to a symbolically important audience.)

¶5. (C) Aliyev's confident tone reflects the GOAJ's growing sense of regional prestige and belief that time is on its side in negotiations with Armenia. In what was almost certainly a pre-scripted engagement, Aliyev had a televised conversation with one of the IDP residents (Tajir Jafarov) to accompany his speech. Referring to ongoing NK negotiations, Aliyev said: "We are trying to solve the issue peacefully. But unfortunately, there is no serious progress for now. But we must be ready for any other version. The growing power of Azerbaijan has an impact on the opposite side too. Jafarov replied: "Our country gets stronger; our economy increases. Developed states of the world take the opinion of our country into account."

Limited Public Response

¶6. (C) Popular reaction to Aliyev's speech has been limited and muted. Broadly speaking, there are two segments of popular opinion regarding the resolution of the NK conflict. One group is skeptical of the GOAJ and the OSCE Minsk Group's ability and/or willingness to resolve the conflict. For example, one local taxi driver, who heard coverage of the speech through local radio, told us that the speech was not important. The driver explained -- in usual hyperbole, but reflecting one strand of popular sentiment -- that President Aliyev and the Minsk Group's efforts are not serious. A second segment of the population has greater confidence in President Aliyev and likely felt buoyed by President Aliyev's more confident tone.

Political Commentators: Speech for Domestic Consumption

¶7. (C) Several local, respected political analysts provided additional insight into how elite segments of Azerbaijani society view President Aliyev's speech. Local analysts agreed that there was not much substantively new in the speech. Analysts observed that while Aliyev's rhetoric was strong, his veiled threat of military force was not new.

¶8. (C) Political Commentator Rasim Musabayov said Aliyev's speech likely was intended to address public concerns -- generated in part by EUR DAS Bryza's April 26 interview that mentioned the status of NK negotiations -- that the GOAJ may be softening its position on the status of Kelbajar and Lachin. Musabayov judged that Aliyev sought to distance himself from Bryza's comments regarding Kelbajar and Lachin, specifically the statement that "negotiations on the conditions of releasing Kelbajar and Lachin still continue," while referencing the principle of "withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from the five regions adjacent to NK." Musabayov also underscored that the speech was given at a symbolic time (the anniversary of Azerbaijan's loss of Shusha) and to a symbolic audience (IDP community) and thus is part of Aliyev's broader effort to maintain legitimacy with the Azerbaijani population on what many local analysts consider as the most important issue shaping Aliyev's credibility and legitimacy.

¶9. (C) Opposition MP member Nasib Nassibli agreed that the speech was largely intended for domestic consumption. Nassibli argued that the speech contained little that was new and was primarily intended to bolster Aliyev's legitimacy.

Comment

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¶10. (C) We will continue to engage with the GOAJ about the generally unhelpful nature of Aliyev's tone and comments on key issues in the negotiations and reinforce EUR DAS Bryza's message to Foreign Minister Mammadyarov. While Aliyev's speech was primarily intended for a domestic audience on the advent of an important anniversary for Azerbaijanis, his more strident tone does not advance the Minsk Group's efforts. Aliyev's personal legitimacy with the Azerbaijan population, however, is tied directly to his position on NK and the perception of Azerbaijan's growing regional prestige and

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wealth. Aliyev's comments focused on both of these points, suggesting the event was designed for a domestic audience. On a positive note, Aliyev's said during his speech that Azerbaijan has followed the path of negotiations and that "we are in the frame of negotiations."

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